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A Nicaraguan's message

Edgar Chamorro is a Nicaraguan who lives in Florida. He was a commander in the FDN, the CIA-supported contra army that is trying to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. In 1984 he became disillusioned with the contra and with the CIA's methods. He testified on atrocities and on the CIA assassination manual that was issued to the contra forces.

For telling the US public what he knew, Chamorro was drummed out of the FDN. Now, the Immigration and Naturalization Service wants to throw him out of the country.

Two weeks ago Chamorro wrote an article in The New York Times that criticized the Reagan administration's policy of increasing military pressure instead of settling for a negotiated peace.

Perry Rivkind, the Miami director of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, says he read the article, then picked up Chamorro's file and issued an exclusionary order saying he is in the United States illegally. That is the first step in a deportation proceeding.

Meanwhile, Congress ought to consider Chamorro's message:

"My experience as a former rebel leader convinced me that the Nicaraguan Democratic Force cannot contribute to the democratization of Nicaragua," he said. "The rebels are in the hands of former national guardsmen who control the contra army, stifle internal dissent, and intimidate or murder those who oppose them."

Chamorro supported the Contadora peace talks initiated by Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela and Panama. "Rather than engage itself further, economically or militarily, the best course for the United States would be to distance itself from the conflict, encouraging political dialogue and supporting Latin American countries in their effort to prevent a regional war," he said.

Furthermore, he called for the abolition of the contra army he used to help lead: "By urging the rebels to lay down their guns, the United States could support a policy of national reconciliation that would strengthen the moderates and pragmatists and weaken the extremists and ideologues on both sides."

This touches on an often overlooked side effect of the administration's policy, both in Nicaragua and El Salvador. The constant stress on winning by force locks the other side into a countervailing strategy.

Moderates and potential peace-makers on the other side are discredited, rendered irrelevant among their peers. Who in the company of proud men dares talk peace if peace means surrender?

The quest for military victory strengthens the hands of what Chamorro calls "extremists and ideologues on both sides ... both among the Sandinistas and their opposition."

If the United States, instead, were offering Nicaragua a fair deal at the bargaining table, the role of moderates who are arguing for a political settlement would be enhanced and the gunslingers would become the irrelevant ones. Who would accept the pain of a prolonged war there is an honorable alternative?

That raises the point of honor, which Chamorro addressed: "The present policy of applying pressure to the Sandinistas until they 'cry uncle' grossly underestimates Nicaraguan pride and self-esteem. A revolution based on national pride and dignity will never 'cry uncle.'"

Chamorro confronted the trendy assumption that the Sandinistas are tyrants who have brought only grief to their people and understand only military pressure. "What we must do is recognize the good that has come from the revolution in Nicaragua," he said. "It has brought a sense of dignity and independence to the Nicaraguan people. The Sandinistas' concern for the poor cannot be faulted."

"Likewise, there are some democratic leaders associated with the contras. The challenge is to bring together the good on both sides with minimal foreign interference."

Chamorro is an insider. He knows Nicaragua, knows the contras, knows the war and knows the negotiator's alternative.

He is an anti-Sandinista democrat who thinks the administration's policy is foolish, immoral and doomed. He speaks with authority. Perhaps that is why somebody wants him deported.